

THE STAR-NEWS

Since 1882

Vol. 120 No. 46

Serving Chula Vista, National City, Bonita and EastLake

February 22, 2002

Alternative-fueled vehicles studied at Gas Summit III

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Rep. Bob Filner (D-Chula Vista) indicated his interest this week in drafting legislation that would give consumers options to buy alternative-fueled vehicles.

There's a caveat: drafting such legislation would be attempted only if it would ensure someone like local researcher James S. Burns, an associate professor at San Diego State University who's forming a local research company, could manufacture such vehicles.

"The technology is already here," Filner said. "We've just got to find a way to get it accepted and adopted by America's automobile manufacturers and by the American public."

In Filner's Gas Summit III held at Chula Vista City Hall this week, the congressman brainstormed about legislative solutions with a handful of people representing consumer groups, SDSU and a research partner, and Poway resident Chris Salcedo, who spearheaded the effort.

Representatives from the oil industry and the automobile manufacturing industry, who were invited, according to Salcedo, didn't attend the summit.

The L3 "Enigma," touted as the world's first hybrid-electric sports car, was discussed but not seen at Wednesday's interactive meeting because a trailer transporting the vehicle from the university had tire problems on the freeway, said Burns, director at the university's



Poway resident Chris Salcedo, left, discusses federal legislation with Rep. Bob Filner (D-Chula Vista) during Gas Summit III.

Photo/Erin Koch

Facility for Applied Manufacturing Enterprise and founder of a company that he's forming called L3 Research. Burns, an El Cajon resident, said the university in partnership with his research group have developed technology that efficiently uses existing systems to build such vehicles.

The "Enigma," is capable of 260 horsepower, gets 80 miles per gallon, and reaches speeds in excess of 100 mph, according to Burns. The car is characterized as a hybrid because it's fueled by a battery and diesel; both fuels can be used simultaneously or separately. Using electric power only, the car has 200 horsepower; using diesel only, 60 horsepower, Burns said.

When fueled by one source, the car's speed is lower than when fuels are combined, he added.

Burns said he spends most of his time in the laboratory and doesn't have the time — or the know-how

— to promote manufacturing of his vehicle. He noted there's an unoccupied fuel-cell research facility in Poway that he'd like to use but lacks backing for such an endeavor.

The entire discussion transpired after 31-year-old Salcedo, who works as a traffic and weather reporter for local Fox 6 News, became enraged a year ago over consumers being "gouged" at the gas pump.

He said he wrote a letter to another congressman about his ideas when his wife was pregnant with their first child, explaining his motivation and proudly brandishing a photograph of his 7-and-half-month old daughter Samantha.

After a tepid reception with that congressman, Salcedo said, he sent the same letter to Filner, who's response resulted in this week's brainstorming session.

What started out for Salcedo as a quest to reduce consumer-dependence on the oil industry for fuel has become an effort to give consumers more options when buying a vehicle, he said.

Moreover, many alternative fuels are cleaner burning and would benefit the environment, Salcedo said.

Salcedo said the legislation, if written, wouldn't be business-negative. The purpose, he emphasized, was to give consumers more options and to increase competition in the manufacturing industry.